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## Faith, Reason, and the Text: The Return of the Middle Ages in Post Modern Scholarship

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Faith, Reason, and the Text: The Return of the Middle Ages  
in Post Modern Scholarship

By

Joseph P. Huffman

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# Faith, Reason, and the Text: The Return of the Middle Ages in Postmodern Scholarship

By Joseph P. Huffman

## Introduction: Medieval and Modernism

For most Americans—both academics as well as non-academics, Christians or non-Christians—things medieval evoke a mixture of images ranging from the fantastic to the anachronistic, but rarely do we consider these relevant to contemporary culture and society.<sup>1</sup> "Medieval" is regarded by most as exotic, strange, in the domain of the "other." Therefore, as an American medievalist and a historian of western culture, I find myself in a fascinating triangulation between things medieval, modern, and postmodern. From this vantage point I have observed some interesting connections between the medieval and the postmodern as they relate to the normative modernism of American culture. In particular, postmodernism has in some significant respects returned to the Middle Ages for its deconstruction of modernist epistemology. I will explore this thesis by comparing how medieval and postmodern approaches to reading texts and assigning authority to texts share affinities in opposition to modernist methodology. Then I shall make some conclusions about what the return of the Middle Ages means for Christian academics regarding their teaching and research opportunities in the emerging postmodern world.

An important aspect in the emergence of western modernity was the creation of the "Dark Ages" as a foil for modern cultural self-identity. This is particularly true for American culture, since it was born as a child of Enlightenment modernism with no medieval grandparents. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement nurtured the West with a new cultural vocabulary, which created a teleological metanarrative of radical newness and continual progress from ignorance to

Joseph P. Huffman examines the cultural affinities between the medieval and the postmodern as alternatives to the modern Enlightenment project. He concludes that medieval and postmodern approaches to textual authority in particular reveal the epistemological limitations of modernism. He therefore encourages Christians to cease privileging modernism and to recover their neglected medieval Christian legacy as a valuable resource for speaking with relevance to the postmodern world. Mr. Huffman is Associate Professor of History at Messiah College.

knowledge. Where the modern age and its first-born son, the United States, were defined as dynamic, progressive, inventive, enlightened, and scientific, the medieval age was by contrast static, backward, unresourceful, unenlightened, and unscientific. In addition to Enlightenment rationalism, American Protestant Puritanism required an era of "dark, Catholic superstition" in the Old World juxtaposed against its new "city on a hill" in the New World. Such optimism was fueled by the Enlightenment belief that a scientific application of human reason to the natural order (for economic and technological development) as well as to the human order (for social and political reform) would produce the best of all possible rational worlds. This was the early self-definition and promise of the modern era—which we shall call modernism. This western ideology grew in strength throughout the nineteenth century, when both the profession of historical study and an historical interest in the Middle Ages began; thus the modernist vision of the Middle Ages was embedded into the medieval past as scholars wrote their national histories. Such a view of the "Dark Ages" was bound up in the Enlightenment self-definition and still maintains strong vestiges in the United States down to the present day, so much so that the average American collegiate thesaurus includes the following synonyms for the word medieval: "antiquated, outmoded, antediluvian, prehistoric, archaic, unenlightened, quaint, and extinct."<sup>2</sup> A tour guide at the Carnegie Museum of Art recently informed a colleague of mine that the medieval era was: "The time when religion took over and nobody could read."

This "Dark Age" vision of medieval Europe has suited modern American culture particularly well. Americans have always been ambivalent toward the Middle Ages, perceiving it as both the land of beautiful ladies and noble knights as well as the land of pervasive ignorance and material degradation; the age of Camelot and of faith as well as a time of theological tyranny and oppression.<sup>3</sup> Cultural historians have begun to ask what the origins of these contradictory visions of medieval Europe were. What they are finding often links the Middle Ages to the postmodernist critique: namely, these visions are *medievalisms*—modern intellectual constructs that

<sup>1</sup>Lee Patterson, "The Return to Philology," *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies* ed. John Van Engen (Notre Dame: Medieval Studies 4) (Notre Dame: 1994), 237. "The isolation of medievalists from the mainstream of humanistic study is an oft-remarked phenomenon that needs little demonstration. Equally obvious is the lack of interest in medieval studies of the vast majority of humanists, for whom both medieval studies and the Middle Ages remain *terra incognita*. In part this sequestration is a function of the defensive self-enclosure of medieval studies itself; in larger part, however, it derives from the role that the Middle Ages, as both historical object and disciplinary subject, has played in the development of modern thought." In this essay I shall be distinguishing between ideologies (medievalism, modernism, postmodernism) and historical periods (medieval, modern, postmodern).

<sup>2</sup>Laurence Urdrang, ed., *The Oxford Thesaurus: American Edition* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1992); William D. Lutz, ed., *The Cambridge Thesaurus of American English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 284.

<sup>3</sup>Pamela S. Morgan, "One Brief Shining Moment: Camelot in Washington, D. C.," *Medievalism in North America* ed. Kathleen Verduin [Studies in Medievalism 6] (Cambridge: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 185-211.

tell us more about modernity than about the Middle Ages themselves.<sup>4</sup>

The most archetypal cases involve the transformation of Joan of Arc from a peasant girl to a defender of liberty and nationalism and Arthur of Avalon as the progenitor of adventurers found as far afield as the Prince Valiant comics, Gothic romances, and the ever-popular Dungeons-and-Dragons genre of games and entertainment. Every American knows that the Magic Kingdom's medieval world is found in Fantasyland, where "Distory" replaces History.<sup>5</sup> And all Americans recognize instinctively the heroism of Robin Hood as one who struggles to bring equality between rich and poor and to protect individual liberty from that dreaded dragon called government, which seeks "taxes, taxes and still more taxes" for its treasure trove. The most remarkable fusion of modern America with medieval Europe is the Excalibur Hotel and Casino—a Fantasyland for adults—where one is encouraged by the marketing of things medieval to quest after the Grail of instant riches and the opportunity to succeed Elvis as the king of Las Vegas. Both prince and pauper alike are exhorted to rest periodically from the battle and dine at restaurants like "Lance-A-Lotta-Pasta."<sup>6</sup> It soon becomes clear that these visions of the Middle Ages are part of an invented past suitable for the cultural forms and values of the modern age, in short a medievalism.<sup>7</sup>

One could explore the use of medieval mystics by nineteenth-century American Protestant evangelists, or the ante-bellum South's utilization of the Middle Ages to justify a social order dominated by chivalrous aristocratic Christian men who comprised a landed elite and subjected the laboring class as their social betters, or even attempts to expropriate Chartres cathedral for the cathedral of St. John the Divine (New York), the National Cathedral in Washington D.C., or even in that monument to American televangelism: Robert Schuler's Crystal Cathedral in California.<sup>8</sup> Of course, these modern romantic medievalisms do not include the

"A 'medievalism' is a modern construction of the medieval past based on modern cultural categories and needs, as opposed to reconstructing the medieval past based on its own historical realities and cultural categories (the latter being the goal of 'medieval studies' scholarship). See Morton W. Bloomfield, 'Reflections of a Medievalist: Americanism, Medievalism, and the Middle Ages,' *Medievalism in American Culture* [Papers of the 18th Annual Conference of the Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies] ed. Bernard Rosenthal and Paul E. Szarmach (Binghamton: State University of New York, 1989), 13-30.

<sup>4</sup>For the typical Hollywood version of Joan see Robin Blaetz, "Cecil B. DeMille's *Joan the Woman*," *Medievalism in North America*, 109-122. Distory is a term coined by Mike Wallace in "Mickey Mouse History: Portraying the Past at Disney World," *Radical History Review* 32 (1985): 33-57.

<sup>5</sup>See Susan Aronstein and Nancy Coiner, "Twice Knightly: Democratizing the Middle Ages for Middle-Class America," *Medievalism in North America*, 212-231.

<sup>6</sup>Lynn White, "The Legacy of the Middle Ages and the American Wild West," *Spectrum* 40 (1965): 191-202.

<sup>7</sup>Theodore R. Hovet, "The Interior or Hidden Life: Medieval Mysticism in Nineteenth-Century American Evangelism," *Medievalism in American Culture*, 53-66; Eugene D. Genovese, "The Southern Slaveholders' View of the Middle Ages," *Medievalism in American Culture*, 31-52; Jane Welch Williams, "The Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove, California and Chartres Cathedral, France: A Television Evangelist's Adaptation of Medieval Ideology," *Medievalism*

medieval creators of parliamentary government, universities, the modern library, eyeglasses, common law, incipient capitalism and the middle class, banks, checks, and those great contributions of late medieval Europe—the discovery of the Americas and the Renaissance—since these too have been claimed as products of a new modernity rather than as the ripe fruits of the Middle Ages. I hope by now that this kind of medievalism is understood for what it is: a culturally constructed “truth” about the past not based on detailed study of the surviving evidence but on the needs of a given culture.<sup>9</sup>

### Medieval and Postmodernism

This Enlightenment-based cultural confidence in the progress and rational emancipation of the modern West from its Dark-Age past was devastated, however, by the horrors of the twentieth century; two incomprehensibly destructive wars foisted upon the world by the very makers of modernism, the unspeakable irrationality of the Holocaust as well as other mass genocides, and the specter of atomic self-annihilation more than humbled the European sense of cultural superiority by mid-century. Add to this experience the growing awareness of the limitations to scientific certainty and comprehensibility and the following post-war trends: technological transformations in medical ethics and the information explosion, the dehumanization of the individual amid globalization of both corporate economics and cultural life, the realization of ecological limitations in a world of unmitigated nationalist competition, the growing “virtual” workplace where employees are hired in a new “putting out” system of production with no social contract between employer and employee and where workers are considered less of a permanent company asset than the computer hardware, and finally the current unparalleled global emigration pattern.<sup>10</sup> The late twentieth century is no longer the rational world of liberating technology and individual freedom envisioned by the Enlightenment. The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb, herself a harsh critic of postmodernism, nevertheless has summed up so well the resulting loss of confi-

<sup>9</sup>Lee Patterson, *On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies*, *Speculum* 65.1 (Jan. 1990): 99. “... the Middle Ages serves as premodernity, the other that must be rejected for the modern self to be known and know itself... the Middle Ages is not a subject for discussion but the rejected object, not a prehistory whose shape can be described but the history—historicity itself—that modernity must reject in order to be itself.”

<sup>10</sup>When referring to the limitations to scientific certainty and comprehensibility I am thinking of the New Physics of the 20th century (Einstein's relativity, quantum physics, and recent discoveries about the fundamental structure of matter: leptons, quarks, muons, photons, anti-matter). Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy and the complexities of astro-physics. Such limitations have not been universally acknowledged to date, and the modernist belief in the absolute authority and objective certitude of science still holds much sway in American culture. In a recent edition of *Time* (July 8, 1996) the following statement is reported. “One scientist said it was high time that history was taken from the historians. History was guesswork, but science will set us free” (76).

dence and growing misgivings about whether modernism has been an empty promise after all:

The experiences of this century hardly dispose us to any complacency about the present, still less about the future. A pessimistic, even apocalyptic, view comes more naturally to a generation which has learned at great pain that the most impressive scientific discoveries may be put to the most grotesque use; that material prosperity sometimes has an inverse relationship to the ‘quality of life’; that a generous social policy may create as many problems as it solves; that even the most benign governments succumb to the dead weight of bureaucracy while the least benign ones are ingenious in devising new and horrendous means of tyranny; that religious passions are exacerbated in a world that is increasingly secular, and national passions in a world that is fatally interdependent; that the most advanced and powerful countries may be held hostage by a handful of primitive terrorists; that our most cherished principles—liberty, equality, fraternity, justice, even peace—have been perverted and degraded in ways our forefathers never dreamed of. At every point we are confronted with shattered promises, blighted hopes, irreconcilable dilemmas, good intentions gone astray, a choice between evils, a world perched on the brink of disaster—all the familiar clichés, which are all too true and which seem to give the lie to the idea of progress.<sup>11</sup>

Clearly the western historical metanarrative has changed dramatically in our century. The result has been a growing sense that the Enlightenment experiment of the modern era has reached a cultural cul-de-sac, and that we are entering a postmodern global historical era. European thinkers have been sensing this since World War II gave birth to the Cold War, as evidenced in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's writings.<sup>12</sup> But Americans have only gotten wind of the changes from the 1960s onward, as Gordon-Conwell professor David Wells indicates in his book *God in the Wasteland*:

... the Enlightenment project collapsed in the 1960s. The assumption among the Enlightenment's proponents that meaning and morality could be discovered simply within the bounds of natural reason and without reference to God has, even in our very secular age, become ever more empty. Their naive faith in inevitable progress has been torpedoed by the inability and the manifold frustrations of the twentieth century. And their belief that knowledge is always good, that knowledge is salvific, is mocked by our deep fears regarding scientific and technological achievements, many of which can easily be used to thwart human well-being as to promote it. By the end of the 1960s modernity had lost its Enlightenment soul. Thus it was that postmodernity began to emerge in the 1970s.<sup>13</sup>

Many Christian intellectuals have long been critics of modernism, and some have begun to see the transition toward a postmodern age at hand.<sup>14</sup> As early as

<sup>11</sup>Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 155.

<sup>12</sup>Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard*, ed. Ronald Berman (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980), 9. “If the world has not approached its end, it has reached a major watershed in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance.” For Solzhenitsyn this means the turn from medieval to modern eras.

<sup>13</sup>David R. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 46.

<sup>14</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951) as well as Paul Tillich's

1949 Chad Walsh wrote a remarkably forward-looking yet little-read book entitled *Early Christians of the 21st Century*.<sup>15</sup> The thrust of his book is an exploration of how Christians could be relevant and engaging in the postmodern world to come. Since the late 1980s David Well's work, along with titles like *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* by Gene Edward Veith, Jr. (Wheaton 1994) and *Christian Belief in a Postmodern World* (Louisville 1989) by Diogenes Allen have appeared amid a raft of new publications by Evangelical thinkers trying to come to terms with postmodernity. Thus the awareness that a postmodern historical era is dawning, and that a postmodernist cultural response is also underway, can be found everywhere by the close of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup> We are left with the troubling uncertainty about whether the Middle Ages were really any darker than the modern era after all.

### Textual Readings: Modern and Postmodern

History, like any field in the humanities or social sciences, has been affected by the postmodernist intellectual movement, which is challenging long-standing assumptions about both modern and medieval culture. In tandem with scholarship on the modernist/postmodernist debate<sup>17</sup> a growing body of literature is appearing on the modern era after all.

*Theology of Culture* ed. Robert C. Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959) for example.

<sup>15</sup>Chad Walsh, *Early Christians of the 21st Century* (New York: rpt. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 9: "... modern civilization, which dates roughly from the Renaissance, is now on its last legs. This glum conviction is less startling than it would have been a few decades ago, when the doctrine of inevitable progress still had many adherents in both low and high places. Today the funeral bell is being rung by a whole army of philosophers and social scientists. I join their ranks not out of the desire to be in step or from a perverse love of the pessimistic, but simply because the facts seem to support their somber diagnosis."

<sup>16</sup>Closest to home is a recent volume of *Christian Scholar's Review* (XXVI:2) which contains a symposium on "Postmodernity and Christians in the Academy." See also Diogenes Allen's article, "The End of the Modern World," CSR XXII:4 (1993): 339-347, esp. 340: "But if you are a Christian, the end of the modern world means the collapse of a secular creed, the creed that has dominated university and research centers. The end of the modern world means that Christianity is liberated from the narrow, constricting, asphyxiating stranglehold of the modern world."

<sup>17</sup>See Norman F. Cantor, *Twentieth-Century Culture: Modernism to Deconstruction* (New York: P. Lang, 1988); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking Into the Abyss: Unintended Thoughts on Culture and Society* (New York: Knopf, 1994); David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Conditions of Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) for example. For specific disciplines see: Herbert Blau, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy Editions, 1981); Hugh J. Silverman, *Postmodernism: Philosophy and the Arts* (New York: Routledge, 1990). For history in particular see F. R. Ankersmit, "Historiography and Postmodernism," *History*

ing which investigates the medievalisms of the modern age.<sup>18</sup> Medieval Studies scholars are thereby striving to end the modernist marginalization of the Middle Ages; and the postmodernists among us are doing so by employing medieval culture as a foil against which to study modernism as a cultural construct.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, just as the Middle Ages had been used previously by modernists as a foil for extolling the virtues of Enlightenment modernity, the medieval world is currently being employed by postmodernists to critique modernism.<sup>20</sup> In both cases the medieval era has functioned as a mirror into which both modernists and postmodernists have gazed to find their own reflections, and thus the actual Middle Ages have been a means to self-reflection, not an end in themselves. Such cultural narcissism does little, however, to help us look beyond ourselves. Yet these gazes directed toward the Middle Ages have ironically helped to clarify the nature of both modernism and postmodernism as cultural constructs. In particular, they also

and *Theory* 28:2 (1989): 137-153; Jean E. Howard, "Towards a Postmodern, Politically Committed Historical Practice," *Uses of History: Marxism, Post-Modernism, and the Renaissance* eds. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson (New York: Manchester University Press, 1991); and Perez Zagorin, "Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations," *History and Theory* 29:3 (1990): 263-274.

<sup>18</sup>See Robin Fleming, "Picturesque History and the Medieval in Nineteenth-Century America," *American Historical Review* 100:4 (October 1995): 1061-1094 and "Nineteenth-Century New England's Memory of the Middle Ages," *Memory and the Middle Ages* eds. Nancy Netzer and Virginia Reinburg [Boston College Museum of Art, Feb. 17-May 21, 1995] (Chestnut Hill, MA: 1995), 78-91; Herwig Wolfram, "'Medieval Studies in America' and 'American Medievalism,'" *Frihmittelalterliche Studien* 11 (1977): 396-408; Norman Cantor, *Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Quill, 1991); *Medievalism in American Culture* (as previously cited); R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols, eds., *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Francis G. Gentry, ed., *German Medievalism* [Studies in Medievalism 3:4] (Rochester: 1991); Leslie J. Workman, ed., *Medievalism in England* [Studies in Medievalism 4] (Rochester: 1992); Leslie J. Workman, ed., *Medievalism in Europe* [Studies in Medievalism 5] (Rochester: 1994); Kathleen Verduin, ed., *Medievalism in North America* [Studies in Medievalism 6] (Rochester: 1994); Eugene Vance, "The Modernity of the Middle Ages in the Future: Remarks on a Recent Book," *Romantic Review* 64 (1973): 140-151; Paul Zumthor, "The Modernity of the Middle Ages," [Lectures given at the Pompidou Center] (January 1979); Stephen G. Nichols, "Modernism and the Politics of Medieval Studies," *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*: 25-56 for example.

<sup>19</sup>Terry Eagleton, "The End of English," *Textual Practice* 1 (1987): 7: "In the so-called postmodern condition what was previously displaced to the margins returns to haunt the very center." Thus medieval studies joins ethnic studies, feminist studies, film studies, and cultural studies of all types.

<sup>20</sup>For example, Jeffrey M. Peak, "'In the Beginning Was the Word': Germany and the Origins of German Studies," *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* uses the modern study of medieval philology to critique modernist methodology: "... disciplines are like texts in so far as they are constituted for very compelling reasons at particular historical moments, which set them on a course that continues to shift direction and assume different meanings as their function changes. Institutional interests, national and patriotic urges, academic and scholarly philosophies intermittently erupted and converged to shape the course of a discipline which, as part of philosophical practice, would significantly influence what constituted scholarship, research, and learning ..." (128).



provide a valuable opportunity for Christian scholars to participate in the dialogue between the modernists and postmodernists concerning textual authority.

The differences between modernism and postmodernism are most striking in their approaches to reading texts as either written documents or cultural artifacts, and thereby in assigning authority to these texts. Postmodernism has challenged what counts for knowledge and the epistemological foundations for knowledge, which hitherto have been based on modernist Enlightenment categories.<sup>21</sup> Historians of all sub-disciplines have been caught in the crossfire, since the discipline of history (like other disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences) was founded on modernist understandings of textual philology and natural science research methodology. Even more to the point, the enterprise of historical study itself is based on the value and meaning of texts as documentary evidence of the past; therefore, whichever texts are assigned authority will define what history is written.<sup>22</sup>

In order to explore the modernist/postmodernist debate over textual authority, I have chosen for our case study what may seem to be a most unlikely genre of texts: medieval forgeries.<sup>23</sup> I have done so for two reasons: firstly, because the medieval period is often labeled by modernists as the "Age of Forgeries," and secondly because forgeries by definition raise obvious questions about textual authority. The great forgeries of our century, like the much celebrated Pildown Manuscript or the Hitler Diaries in 1983 have done nothing to alter modern belief in the uniqueness of medieval credibility.<sup>24</sup> From the remarkable Donation of Constantine to the hundreds of forged royal, clerical and aristocratic charters, from the many relics of the true Cross to "forged" saints like St. Christopher, the medieval penchant for creative imitation has been duly noted.<sup>25</sup> Many otherwise illustrious and respected

<sup>21</sup>Historians have grappled with the issue of objectivity/subjectivity well before the advent of Postmodernism. For a history of this debate see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and the articles in response to the book in "AHR Forum: Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream*: The Objectivity Question and the Future of the Historical Profession," *American Historical Review* 96:3 (June 1991).

<sup>22</sup>For a fundamental study of the place of history amid postmodernist scholarship see Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

<sup>23</sup>I take my lead on the matter of medieval forgeries from Horst Fuhrmann, *Einführung in die Mittelalter* (Munich: Beck, 1987), 195-236 and from the thorough examination of such documents in: *Fälschungen im Mittelalter: Internationaler Kongress der Monumenta Germaniae Historica* (Munich, 16-19. September 1986) [Schriften der Monumenta Germaniae Historica 33: 1-6] (Hanover: 1988-90).

<sup>24</sup>Frank Spencer, *Pildown: a Scientific Forgery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1990), Richard and Hugo, *The Hitler Diaries* (New York: Morrow, 1983); Robert Harris, *Selling Hitler: The Story of the Hitler Diaries* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986); Charles Hamilton, *The Hitler Diaries: Fakes that Fooled the World* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991).

<sup>25</sup>See Marjorie Chibnall, "Forgery in Narrative Charters," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 4: 331-346; Giles Constable, "Forged Letters in the Middle Ages," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 5: 11-37; Franz Josef Schmale, "Fälschungen in der Geschichtsschreibung," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 1: 121-132.

clerical and secular leaders were involved in countless medieval forgeries, to the amazement and confusion of modern scholars who began the study of medieval manuscripts. This led them to conclude that the Middle Ages were forgery-prone, deficient in critical sensibility, and morally dim—hence the "Dark Ages." This judgment, of course, tells us more about the cultural values of modern scholars than it does about why medievals were so apt to produce forged documents. How did this mis-reading of medieval textual conventions come about? In the fifteenth-century Renaissance a tradition of humanist scholarship emerged from the growing late medieval study of Greek and Hebrew.<sup>26</sup> Such language-based learning, when coupled with Latin literacy, produced a learned culture emphasizing the textual and philological, and a zeal for the "pure text" uncorrupted by centuries of handmade copies. The discovery of medieval forgeries at the Vatican and elsewhere in the course of the humanists' research drew linguistic studies into the fray of the Reformation, and thereafter served Protestants well for many centuries in their disagreements with "deceitful Rome."<sup>27</sup> But this was still learning in the service of faith. A secularized version of this philological approach to truth emerged during the Enlightenment, which rejected both Catholic and Protestant ways of reading texts as still essentially medieval since they were religiously motivated—what the Protestants had wrought on Catholics was now wrought on themselves. By the nineteenth century philology-based scholarship (known by its German creators as *Quellenkritik*) became the basis of professional historical research—that is, a *critical textual* basis for truth and knowledge became the backbone for historical truth. And here is the modernist philology of truth in a nutshell: a document is considered either true or false based on whether or not it contains the *formal* authenticity it claims to possess. Just as the scientists of the seventeenth century proved the medieval cosmos false/inauthentic in its formal structure (and thus a forgery) by the scientific method, so too texts that did not have the correct *formal* structure were equally false/inauthentic. Indeed, an entire professional discipline of diplomatics was created with methods of discerning the authenticity of a given historical text based on formal, textual, and linguistic elements. These signifiers of authenticity helped one date and localize a document in order to verify its supposed legitimacy. Therefore, as the modern era continued, it became fundamental to the viability of a text that it be formally accurate—it must be "true" in *form* before the truth or accuracy of its *content* could be seriously considered. If the form (that is, claims to origin, authorship, authenticity) was rejected as not genuine, the

<sup>26</sup>Actually, this was a revival of a much older tradition of humanist philology begun by Alexandrine scholars of early Hellenism who preserved the intellectual inheritance of Greek antiquity. This method was transposed into Italy in the fifteenth century by refugee scholars from the Byzantine empire, which collapsed in 1453.

<sup>27</sup>As one of many such examples, German Protestants like Wilhelm Kammeier (1889-1959) in the 1930s accused the Roman church of removing "pure Germanness" from real medieval texts and replacing them with an entire "romanized" corpus of forgeries in the 15th century. Such ethnocentric, nationalistic propaganda was gladly taken up by the Nazis to attack Catholic clergy in Germany.



content (that is, remaining claims to truth) was thereby rejected out of hand. Formal accuracy then became the *discrimen veri et falsi* (distinction between true and false).

While this approach to textual authority served well the needs of public administration in terms of legal and property matters, such administrative literacy, which valued formal accuracy above all else, had other cultural consequences. Not only did it undermine traditional religious authority substantially, but replaced it with a new "scientific" (or positivist) approach to truth for the humanities mirroring the natural sciences. The "truth" discovered by this scientific approach to texts—that is, that so many medieval texts were not formally authentic—gave as much cultural authority to modern philology as the seventeenth-century discoveries about false notions of the universe's form had given to the scientific method. A "Textual Revolution" or "Textual Enlightenment" had occurred, and truth would never be the same. Historical truth now meant only the "facts," which could be verified by rational examination of the texts and tested by investigative analysis of the evidence—the "literal truth" of *form* became superior to the traditional medieval mode of identifying truth in the *content* of a text. The latter was disparaged as coming from an "age of faith and superstition" rather than from the modern, enlightened age of reason, wherein truth was equated with a formalist and literalist view of accuracy. This was cultural shorthand for "our truth is superior to your truth." As a sign of the shift from medieval to modern modes of reading texts, the Latin term *bona fide* lost its original medieval meaning (literally, something done "in good faith") and came to mean "genuine, real, without fraud" in an Enlightenment sense.

Postmodernist scholarship, however, has been raising doubts about the traditional modernist approach to textual authority. (I shall restrict my comments here to the ways in which postmodernism has entered the discipline of history, though I am sure those in other disciplines will recognize the fingerprints.) Postmodernist historians—generally those in the New Cultural History movement—assert that the Enlightenment-based modern definitions of and the distinction between fact and falsity are culturally constructed and thus limiting factors in doing history or any other of the "human sciences."<sup>28</sup> For postmodernists the *external form* of a given text (be it written, monumental, or artistic) is no more important in understanding a culture than the *internal content* of the text. In fact the form (or external structure) of the text can actually interfere with our understanding of its internal content: the heart of the matter for the new cultural historians is therefore located in the dis-

<sup>28</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 126: "Every discipline . . . is, as Nietzsche saw most clearly, constituted by what it forbids its practitioners to do. Every discipline is made up of a set of restrictions on thought and imagination, and none is more hedged about with taboos than professional historiography." Lee Patterson, "On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies," 90: " . . . precisely the recognition that the natural, universal, given, transcendent, and timeless is historically constructed—and therefore alterable—is the great, liberating insight of postmodernism."

course contained *within the text*.<sup>29</sup> Since language itself is understood as a formal metaphor or verbal signifier that contains truth beyond its mere textual form, the labeling as non-factual and fictitious (or forged) by the modern philological method is based merely upon *formal* concerns. Postmodernist historians are reemphasizing the value of the long-ignored *content* of documents hitherto alienated from the canon of legitimate historical texts (like forgeries).

This so-called "New Philology" is also calling for scholars to allow such texts to speak on their own terms. Dominick LaCapra in particular, who traces his approach to Bakhtin and Derrida, has challenged historians to listen more than categorize:

The historian's task, then, is to develop a "dialogue" in which the autonomous past is allowed to question our recurring attempts to reduce it to order. "It must be actively recognized that the past has its own 'voices' that must be respected," LaCapra writes, "especially when they resist or qualify the interpretations we would like to place on them. A text is a network of resistances, and a dialogue is a two-way affair; a good reader is also an attentive and patient reader."<sup>30</sup>

Such an approach encourages us to let medieval forgers and forgeries speak to us on their own terms, rather than to categorize them according to our standards because they seem to make no sense to us otherwise. But this comes with a price: it places medieval people at the center of history (in this instance) and displaces the ahistorical presentist thinking so prevalent in modernism. Uncomfortably, we are no longer at the hub of human history nor the focal point toward which all things tend—so long to the modernist historical teleology of "progress to us."<sup>31</sup> Another epistemological revolution has thus occurred, and other historical eras no longer revolve around us. We are now just one of many other eras in the historical cosmos. Indeed, the modern age is increasingly understood as just another historical period between the ancient and postmodern epochs.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, "Table ronde du 20 mai 1978," *L'Impossible prison* ed. Michelle Perrot (Paris: Seuil, 1980), 55: "My general theme is not society, it is true/false discourse . . ."

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd S. Kramer, "Literature, Criticism, and Historical Imagination: The Literary Challenge of Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra," *The New Cultural History* ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 103.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Nichols, "Modernism and the Politics of Medieval Studies," *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, 31: "A history in the service of the present, which believes in the superiority of the modern age for understanding the past, is a history that will inevitably place great weight upon the archaeology of historical details, the individual facts, as proofs of its superior ability to recover and interpret a past hidden from itself."

<sup>32</sup> Umberto Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages," *Travels in Hyperreality* trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1986), 73-85 identifies some striking social and cultural similarities between the dawning of the Early Middle Ages amid the collapse of the western Roman empire and the dawning of the Postmodern Age amid the exhaustion of western Modernism: for example, growing insecurity and a resulting millennialism, Robin Hood justice as the gap between rich and poor expands, the removal of the socio-economic élite from the cities to suburban estates while the cities decayed, the massive influx of non-Roman emigrants from the provinces, the mixture of and conflict between cultures, the poor quality of manu-

Others have encouraged us to think of historical research and writing not in modernist scientific (or positivist) terms but rather in pre-modern humanist terms more akin to literature, language, philosophy, and the arts.<sup>33</sup> Hayden White, an advocate of Foucault, has told historians, "Only a willful, tyrannical intelligence could believe that the only kind of knowledge we can aspire to is that represented by the physical sciences."<sup>34</sup> This approach encourages us to leave aside the "scientific facts" and consider medieval forgers in their own historical context as producers of cultural documents which had a specific social function and which reflected their conceptions of truth and textual authority. This represents an important shift from a "fact-based" positivist science that emphasizes narrative causation but neglects purpose; in terms of reading texts this requires us to move from what the text says to how it functions, and to emphasize the meaning of a text inscribed by contemporaries over the modernist historian's concerns with historical causation.<sup>35</sup> So we must investigate the medieval meaning and function of a forged document rather than factually identify its constituent parts and pronounce it a lie.

Therefore, the epistemological and philological redirection inherent in a postmodernist reading of texts rejects the modernist polarity between absolutely true and false texts, allowing for the possibility that, even though in its *form* a text claims false authorship or authority, it is still a valid text to be studied for its *content*. It is no less an authoritative text and potentially contains no less historical truth than a formally authentic text. In fact, this view of texts merely reminds us why forgeries are so often taken as genuine—they contain enough truth in *content* to be considered legitimate and authoritative.

### Textual Readings: Medieval

Now that we have considered modernist and postmodernist readings of historical texts, let us finally give the medieval world a chance to explain its forgeries. We ask again, how could an "Age of Christian faith" produce such a series of forged documents? To begin with, we must consider what forgery means. Today forgery is a crime. We live in a world of established and objective law, issued and enforced

factured goods, an art "not systematic but additive and composite," centers of intellectual retreat (the American university and medieval monastery), wandering youth, emigrants, and tourism along pilgrimage routes, and I would add the increasing weight and cost of the state and military.

Traditional historians like Lawrence Stone have also decried the predominance of the New Social History and called for more of a literary history; see Stone, *The Past and Present Revisited* (London: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>33</sup>White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 23. The great medieval historian Richard Southern has said, "a historian should aim at satisfying the same emotional and intellectual needs as a novelist and poet" (in "The Classical Tradition from Einhard to Geoffrey of Monmouth," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5th Series [1970] 175).

<sup>34</sup>Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Random House, 1984), 5.

by the sovereign state. To forge documents infringes on the very law that empowers the state by privatizing public authority and prerogatives (for example, printing money). This was the legal context in which modern philologists read medieval forgeries, and their conclusions are not hard to comprehend. But until the twelfth or thirteenth century such was not the case in medieval Europe. Law was not understood as established by humans on the basis of earthly utility, but as established in a higher sense by a righteousness independent of human statute—God was the source of justice. A law was legitimated by the justice inherent in it, not by the statutory authority of a state. Thus, injustice contained within law was an absurdity for medievists, and if individuals ever encountered it they were obliged out of a sense of justice to act in conformity with the divine order instead. Many modern Christian traditions still maintain direct historical ties to this medieval sense that justice is not created by the state but by God and that institutionalized injustice should be resisted.

This sense of justice moved the highly respected bishop and reformer Burchard of Worms (1000–1025), for example, to reconstruct texts in his collection of church canons to reflect the way the purer early church *must* have been organized in contrast to the deterioration of his day caused by a century of Viking and Magyar invasions. He often strengthened the authority of his collection by inserting at points the authorship of St. Augustine to synodal decrees, since the texts were consistent with the ideas and truth the great Church Father had taught. Burchard was giving the originator of an idea credit for it, even though it had been mediated through later church synods. Of course moderns would consider this simple plagiarism, but Burchard and many others drew up such writings with strong faith in their essential truthfulness, which could not be restricted by as-yet uninvented modern rules of textual etiquette.<sup>36</sup>

Again, this understanding of textual authority did not come from a lesser intellectual capacity; rather, the text was understood as a formal foreground or surface for the transcendent truth. Hence truth and justice were realities that were only incarnated into textual form, but they were not restricted by the form: the text was pliable instead of the truth it announced.

Such a sense of truth and text comes from an age of oral culture. Europe during the Early Middle Ages (fifth-tenth centuries) was a preliterate society (meaning the majority of the population had no practical use for literacy). In such an "oral community," truth and authority were not considered to be contained merely in texts. Those few texts that people encountered were highly respected, especially the Scriptures. But since the vast majority of people could not read them, for all practical purposes textual truth and authority were the private preserve of a small minority—the "textual community."<sup>37</sup> Therefore, truth had to be negotiated in oral

<sup>36</sup>Ute-Renate Blumenthal, "Fälschungen bei Kanonisten der Kirchenreform des 11. Jahrhunderts," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 2: 241–262.

<sup>37</sup>See M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066–1307* 2nd ed. (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993). Brian Stock has also produced seminal works in the under-

language and custom—whether or not it was written down was secondary and derivative. The truth was literally preserved among the people, and writing it down did not usurp the communal sense of truth and authority.

It did not, that is, until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The reintroduction of Roman Law (a text-based, statutory-based system of law) and successful royal efforts at increasing governmental centralization during the High Middle Ages (eleventh-thirteenth centuries) gradually transformed medieval ways of discourse about property rights and legal jurisdiction. The upshot was a massive increase in the production of written documents to verify such claims to power. The care for an authoritative, accurate text was now in vogue among the expanding "textual community," and both the papal chancery as well as the growing universities developed sophisticated procedures for identifying forged charters and corruptions in manuscripts of the Bible effected by years of hand copying.

Monarchs, too, as a means of extending their legal authority throughout their realms, began to demand documentary evidence for property and jurisdictional claims. How then, does a largely oral culture respond to the demand for documentary evidence of their traditional claims? There were two options: the sword and the pen, both of which were employed in defense of the traditional sense of justice. The sword was used by nobles. The story is told of a nobleman, who when asked by English royal officials by what warrant he held an estate, replied by unsheathing an ancient, rusty sword and saying, "Here, my lords, is my warrant!"<sup>35</sup> But what was a monastery or bishopric to do when royal legal authorities began to demand documentary evidence that their institutions exercised authority or possessed property in a given locale? The pen was also drawn with a sense of justice: some enterprising monk or cleric merely produced a charter—a fraudulent, forged charter according to modern philological standards—which confirmed the truth that customary rights and authority had been exercised by his religious house for as long as anyone could remember. Although the document's *form* was forged (and quite well done in most cases), the legal claims it made in the *content* were true and thus the document reflected a righteous truth as far as the monastic or clerical community were concerned. Once again, the ultimate, over-riding truth resided in God's righteous order in the community rather than in human forms such as written texts. We might call this a kind of "extra-textual" view of truth. The monk would not only have had a clear conscience, but would have felt that he had done a good

standing of how literacy shaped attitudes toward textual authority. See especially the first and last chapters in his *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) and *Listening for the Text: on the Uses of the Past* (Baltimore: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990). I have used his notion of textual communities here. For a classic study of the Bible as text among the textual community see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964).

<sup>35</sup>This was done by Earl John of Warenne in the reign of Edward I: *The Chronicle of Walter of Guisborough* ed. Harry Rothwell [Camden Society 3rd Series volume 89] (London: Royal Historical Society, 1957), 216.

deed by "telling the truth" in a form suitable to the new needs of governmental jurisdiction. He was thereby justified before God, who is Truth, when he created the text for his community.<sup>36</sup> There is no superstition operating here, just a different cultural attitude toward the role of texts and proving the truth in society. In fact the monk has done his work *bona fide*—"in good faith," which served to vouch for the integrity and veracity of his efforts.<sup>37</sup> This medieval mode of thought about truth is not antiquated or old-fashioned. Such "medieval *déjà vu*" crops up all the time: for example, in the statement by mathematician Douglas R. Hofstadter in his best-seller *Gödel, Escher, Bach* that provability is (even in mathematics) a weaker notion than truth "no matter what axiomatic system is involved."<sup>38</sup> That is what our monk is trying to tell us: the means of provability (that is, the text) is a weaker notion than the truth the text proclaims.

Medieval authorities certainly saw the formal and historical errors of forgeries as modern scholars do (for example, charters claiming to be older than they were, or with the wrong author cited) and even commented on them. But their remarks maintain the traditional medieval attitude toward texts. St. Bonaventure (died 1274) concluded about a forged document, "Although it is false, nevertheless it contains much of high truth." Vincent of Beauvais in the thirteenth century concluded about canonical forgeries in general: "Be they authentic or false [in form], they can be believed and read without danger for the soul" since they contain truth in their content.<sup>39</sup> Only heretics produce real forgeries, since their errors are found not so much in the *form* as in the *content* of their texts. Heretical texts were inauthentic and fraudulent, because their content was rooted not in truth but in error. Hence an authentic text (in modern terms) written by a heretic was a forgery (in medieval terms) because of its error-filled content that claimed to be true, while a forged text (in modern terms) asserting truth was considered a truthful and accurate document. For medieval thinkers, this was not irrational but most eminently rational and accurate as an understanding of truth: reality operates according to the divine order and is merely mediated through language. So the form of the language (the formal text as opposed to oral transmission) is of secondary consequence. Reality is found not in the structure but in the discourse of a text, as the postmodernists might say.

The classic example of such an attitude toward textual truth is the eighth-century Donation of Constantine. Those who composed it centuries after Constantine's age were sure that the pope's jurisdictional authority around Rome, the city having been abandoned long ago by emperors, must have been derived from imperial gift. How else could such a political state of affairs have resulted?

<sup>36</sup>Frantisek Graus, "Fälschungen im Gewand der Frömmigkeit," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 5: 261-282 and Elisabeth A. R. Brown, "Falsitas pia sive reprehensibilis: Medieval Forgers and their Intentions," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 1: 109-119.

<sup>37</sup>Horst Fuhrmann, "Von der Wahrheit der Fälscher," *Fälschungen im Mittelalter* 1: 83-98.

<sup>38</sup>Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (NY: Basic Books, 1979; rpt. 1989), 19.

<sup>39</sup>As cited in Fuhrmann, *Einführung ins Mittelalter* 207, 216.

Thus Constantine *must* have given the pope political authority when he moved to the new Rome (Constantinople), and a charter was drawn up which reflected the ancient but lost truth. When Arnold of Brescia (died 1155), the Waldensians, and later the Hussites rejected the Donation, they were seen as heretics and indicted—because they had used formal, historical, and philological criticism of the document? No, because they put its truth into question and thereby threatened the ecclesiological and material foundations of the Roman church—they argued that such a donation drew the church away from its apostolic life of voluntary poverty and *therefore* was not righteous before God. Hence the entire Donation was judged false based on extra-textual reasoning.

When formal, historical, and philological criticism of the document itself did come, the results might be surprising. Lorenzo Valla (died 1457) proved with primarily linguistic arguments that the Donation of Constantine was a forged charter. A bit earlier the Cardinal-Bishop Nicolaus of Cusa (died 1464) came to the same conclusion, and moreover had pointed out the inauthenticity of widely dispersed papal decretals. What happened to these two men? Both continued to enjoy careers in high church office and incomes from church benefices. The difference between the heretical and the orthodox critics of the Donation? While the former rejected the *content* of the text as false, the latter rejected only the *form* of the text as false. Nicolaus of Cusa and Lorenzo Valla continued to accept the supposed truth of the Donation while rejecting the document defining it.<sup>45</sup> For these medieval thinkers both heresy and orthodoxy were based on extra-textual notions of truth.

### The Medieval in a Postmodern World

Now let us bring this matter full circle. The cultural paradigm-shift away from the modernist understanding of textual truth and authority recommended by the postmodernists shares some striking affinities with the older medieval view. First of all, postmodernism sheers away the Enlightenment-based modernist/positivist assumptions about textual authority, which have served for so long to label medieval culture as irrational and Christianity in particular as a peculiar superstition fashioned during the pre-rational "Dark Ages." And like the medieval understanding of texts, postmodernism emphasizes the meaning of a text as a marker of social and cultural practice rather than as a mere record of historical facts. In all this, both medieval and postmodernist understandings of textual authority sever the modernist connection between form and truth: truth is not bound by form, which is something merely designed for its social and cultural usefulness. To this extent

<sup>45</sup>Lorenzo Valla, *The Treatise of Lorenzo Valla on the Donation of Constantine* trans. Christopher B. Coleman [Renaissance Society of America Reprint Texts 1] (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993); L. Valla, *De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione* ed. Wolfram Setz [Monumenta Germaniae Historica Quellen zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters 10] (Weimar: H.B.ohlhaus Nachfolger, 1976); Franz Anton von Scharpf, *Der Cardinal und Bischof Nicolaus von Cusa: Das kirchliche Wirken. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Reformation innerhalb der katholischen Kirche im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1966).

postmodernist notions are not really new, then; but they do open new possibilities—especially for Christian scholars.

I share some of the criticisms of postmodernism and do not present myself as a proponent but rather as an observer of this late twentieth-century movement. Surely the centrifugal tendency of postmodernism to decenter the modern epistemology of truth in Foucaultian fashion without replacing it with another can have nihilistic results—it often produces idiosyncratic, topical scholarship with no conceptual framework that justifies and integrates a given discipline. And if all modes of discourse about truth are mere cultural constructs detached from objective correlates beyond the discourse and are equally privileged, the only principled commitment left to the intellectual lies in deconstructing the "blind dogmatism" of all others who disagree with you and your politics.<sup>46</sup> The new historical metanarrative then becomes whatever you wish it to be, and history in particular becomes "historiographic metafiction"—just another genre of fiction writing liberated from concerns about "fact."<sup>45</sup> Indeed, literary theorists have been roundly criticized for imaginatively rewriting historical texts by way of allegorizing their meaning (and I thought only medieval people read texts allegorically).<sup>46</sup> The endeavor to comprehend human history must incorporate the literal, historical meaning of the text as well as the metaphorical: this is something by the way that medieval exegetes already knew so long ago.

While these concerns are valid, the problems are less apocalyptic than is often asserted. To my mind postmodernism is not a revolutionary intellectual movement, but rather the culmination of modernism. I would agree with the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who once called Foucault and Derrida "Young Conservatives" because, although their "irreconcilable anti-modernism" had served as a solvent for modernism, they replaced it with no revolutionary agenda once deconstruction was complete.<sup>47</sup> The postmodernist movement is the logical con-

<sup>46</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Can Scholarship and Christian Conviction Mix: A New Look at the Integration of Knowledge," (an unpublished paper delivered in 1996) 26: "Whereas for a long time now it has been the calling of the Christian scholar to emphasize that Christianity offers a distinctive perspective on reality, the time may be coming when it will be at least as important to emphasize our shared humanity and the importance of mutual listening. If what emerges from the overthrow of the hegemony of Eurocentric bourgeois white males is not speaking and listening in dialogue but hard-of-hearing multiple power constellations, then nothing has been gained."

<sup>47</sup>Janda Huitheon, "The Postmodern Problem: Problematising of History," *English Studies in Canada* (December 1988) 371ff.; rpt. in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988). For a postmodernist defense of history as literary fiction see Paul Veyne, *Writing History: Essay on Historical Epistemology* trans. Mina Moore-Rinvuluceri (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1984).

<sup>48</sup>Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 58: "The discredit into which interpretation has fallen is thus at one with the disrepute visited on allegory itself."

<sup>49</sup>Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity Versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique* (Winter 1981): 13. See also his essay, "Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*

ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 103-108 and Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul

clusion of modernism's cultural entropy and is part of a long heritage of other anti-modernist movements stretching back to the early nineteenth century. Romanticism's use of the Middle Ages as an antidote to scientific, mechanical modernism has been well documented.<sup>48</sup> It was followed by other challenges to the Enlightenment social and cultural world crafted by European male property owners: Marxism, the anti-slavery movement, the women's movement, labor movements, the civil rights movement, *avant garde* modern art movements, Neo-orthodoxy, and so forth. The Postmodernists are reminding us, as their many predecessors have, that the emperor's modernist new clothes are, shall we say, "culturally constructed" and thereby not universal or absolute sources of truth.

Many Christian intellectuals have been saying the same thing throughout the modern era, and nowhere have we had a better opportunity to participate than in the dialogue to come. Whereas modernism has marginalized Christianity as superstitious and irrational, postmodernism offers a re-legitimation of the Christian voice as one of the many "communities of conviction." Many Christians agree with postmodernists that modern western culture has reached its teleological end and has found that it is without a transcendent or universal foundation at its center. Gradually an awareness is emerging that the evacuation of purpose bound up with modernization is hardly bearable.<sup>49</sup> Now that postmodernism has pointed out the "forgery" of modernism, the search for a transcendent and universal center has begun, and Christians should be engaged in the quest rather than segregating themselves in academic and religious subcultures. We could learn a lot from those medieval Christians who helped invent a new culture amid the confluence of the old Roman empire and the new world of Germanic immigrants.

Our participation will require us to search for ways to speak to the human condition in the twenty-first century that are not solely from the culture of western modernity.<sup>50</sup> The global conditions will require it, and the majority of Christians will be doing it (since they will come from the non-western world).<sup>51</sup> In recent

Rabinow's response, "What is Maturity? Habermas and Foucault on 'What is Enlightenment?'" 109-121.

<sup>48</sup>See for example T. J. Jackson Lears' chapter entitled "The Morning of Belief: Medieval Mentalities in a Modern World," in *No Place of Grace. Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

<sup>49</sup>Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, 47: "Post-modern thinkers are the vanguard of a profound reaction to the failure of the Enlightenment project, giving expression to a deeply held suspicion that modernity is in fact the enemy of human life." He too sees postmodernism as a logical extension of modernism; see 26ff. and 220.

<sup>50</sup>I should also point out here that the Bible itself is not a production of western modernity (though some interpretations are), and so it is eminently suitable for this task.

<sup>51</sup>According to recent editions of the *Mission Handbook* (a yearly publication of the Mission Advanced Research and Communication Center) there are already more Christians in Africa or Asia than in North America. Christianity is rapidly becoming a non-Western religion with Evangelical Protestants comprising only about 3-4% of the world population of Christians. For specific statistics on this trend see David B. Barrett, ed. *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Study of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Oxford

decades missionaries have taught us a great deal about distinguishing between the gospel and culture; perhaps it is time to apply this approach to Modern western culture. Lesslie Newbigin, a lifelong missionary in India, has published a fascinating study of western modernism based on his Warfield Lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1984.<sup>52</sup> He sees Enlightenment-based western culture as a missionary frontier, where Westerners need to be reached with the Gospel from a biblical perspective of non-western cultures. One could say in fairness that he, too, is deconstructing modernism as a cultural strategy for missionary work in the West.

Collaboration with colleagues, both Christian and non-Christian, who either come from or study non-western regions of the world has taught me a remarkable thing: that the traditional cultures and societies they describe have a great deal in common with pre-modern western society and culture. So it has occurred to me that we might also look to the real Christian Middle Ages as a source for speaking to an increasingly global culture that shares more affinities with the pre-modern than the modern West. Evangelical Christians should move beyond the debates of modernism and begin preparing themselves and their students for the postmodern global era. They could begin by joining a growing number of Protestant Christians who are embracing medieval Christianity as part of their heritage, as Catholic scholars have done for a long time.<sup>53</sup> Evangelical Protestants have instead embraced modernism much more fully in a cultural sense; indeed they have been having a love-hate relationship with it since the Reformation.<sup>54</sup> Perhaps Evangelicals could begin to see the Middle Ages as a rich source of intellectual life and spirituality ready and relevant for current scholarship. Just ask any academic philosopher how "hot" the revival in medieval philosophy is at the current time.<sup>55</sup>

The implementation of a medieval hermeneutical orientation, however, will challenge us to reconsider our modernist understanding of issues in the classroom

Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>52</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks. The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1986), 20: "Here, surely, is the most challenging missionary frontier of our time."

<sup>53</sup>John Van Engen, "The Christian Middle Ages as an Historiographical Problem," *American Historical Review* 91.3 (June 1986): 536: "Protestant as well as Jewish and agnostic historians now approach medieval religious life far more sympathetically, and Catholic historians in turn far more critically, than was conceivable in the past. At times inherited roles and outlooks have been virtually reversed. Plainly put, medieval Christianity is no longer an overwhelmingly 'Catholic' subject attracting mainly 'Catholic' scholars."

<sup>54</sup>The Reformation reminds us that Christians know something about the rejection of a canon and the *magisterium* upon which it was based in favor of the authority of individual conscience. The Postmodernists are not the first to deconstruct the *status quo*.

<sup>55</sup>Mark D. Jordan, "Medieval Philosophy of the Future!" *The Past and Future of Medieval Studies*, ed. John van Engen (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 159: "In fact, we are awash in the academic study of medieval philosophy. The bibliographies are twice or three times what they were in the hey-day of neo-Thomism. Indeed, one often imagines that there are today more students of thirteenth-century thought than were in the thirteenth century."



at Christian colleges.<sup>56</sup> For example, in missiology might we not study the first great post-Pauline missionary movement of the Church led by Celtic and Anglo-Saxon monks in order to learn their strategies for indigenization of the gospel? Or might we revive the medieval Christian notion of a moral economy when teaching about the nature of free-market capitalism? And what results would we get if we subjected modern (and postmodern) politics, advertising, news, and entertainment paradigms to the medieval standard of truth in content rather than an emphasis on formal image? In the postmodern age where video representations of reality are fast replacing textual literacy, we would benefit from studying how the medieval textual community translated their knowledge into images accessible to the majority non-textual community.<sup>57</sup> How might the medieval sense of Christendom soften our divisions and overcome the modern force of nationalism, which has so often violently pitted modern Christians against each other for the sake of loyalty to state and ideology? Finally, what more multicultural civilization does one need than that formed in medieval Europe by a fusion of Roman, Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Slavic, Scandanavian, Arabic, and Jewish peoples?

An even more fundamental question for the Christian college is this: should we in the twenty-first century continue to think of the practice of integrating faith and learning in a modernist paradigm wherein the rational intellect and religious faith are mutually exclusive and must be intentionally forged together like opposite ends of magnets? Or might we reacquire ourselves with the medieval Christian understanding of a harmonious unity between these two in the soul? And shall we still need to join the "Modernist-Fundamentalist Battle for the Bible?" Or would a renewal of the medieval Christian understanding of textual authority free us from requiring formal scientific proofs of scriptural "authenticity" in order to believe in the truth spoken therein? Obliging our religious faith to be based on scientific proof of form suggests more faith in modernism and the scientific method than in the truth expressed in the text. The fundamentalist notion of inerrancy is itself in this respect a peculiarly modern construct.

Ceasing to privilege (but not destroy) Enlightenment categories of discourse on truth and textual authority in particular enables a return to an originally Chris-

<sup>56</sup>Diogenes Allen, "The End of the Modern World," 346: "The question for me is whether the Christian churches can rise to the challenge. There are within our heritage rich treasures upon which to draw, but too much of our present practice has been to jettison the cargo in order to accommodate ourselves to the modern world."

<sup>57</sup>Eco, "Living in the New Middle Ages," 81-82 compares the similarities between medieval and postmodern modes of public communication: "In both periods the select elite debates written texts with alphabetic mentality, but then translates into images the essential data or knowledge and the fundamental structure of the ruling ideology. The Middle Ages are the civilization of vision, where the cathedral is the great book in stone, and is indeed the advertisement; the TV screen, the mystic comic strip that must narrate and explain everything, the nations of the earth, the arts and crafts, the days of the year, the seasons of sowing and reaping, the mysteries of the faith, the episodes of sacred and profane history, and the lives of the saints (great models of behavior, as superstars and pop singers are today, an elite without political power, but with great charismatic power)."

ian understanding of these subjects, one stripped from the false polarity that has historically been at the root of the Fundamentalist-Modernist conflict over Scriptural authority and the subsequent need to integrate one's faith and intellectual life as if they were opposing forces in one's soul. A holistic appreciation of truth emerges that is not bound by modern western textual rules, and allows the Word once again to operate beyond the bounds of the page. We thereby cease limiting "God off the page" merely to "God on the page." As Christians who worship a God whose truth transcends cultures and written texts of all sorts and yet who has chosen to be manifested through just such forms, we should be able to understand the postmodernist (read medieval) perspective on culture and see the opportunities therein for celebrating anew the ancient vitality of religious life and scriptural truth.

Having said all this, however, I wish to close by making it clear that I am not calling for some sort of cultural war. That is the stuff of the modern age. Nor am I suggesting the adoption of the medieval worldview in its entirety. Rather, as C. S. Lewis wrote in his consideration of the medieval "Discarded Image," "I hope no one will think that I am recommending a return to the Medieval Model. I am only suggesting considerations that may induce us to regard all Models in the right way, respecting each and idolizing none."<sup>58</sup>

We should, as Christians, refrain from absolutizing any cultural model—including modernism—lest we act as the Judaizing Christians of old. Rather, we ought to take that great medieval saint, Bishop Augustine of Hippo, as our guide. He wrote during an age of cultural transition and yet was not apocalyptic, and he distinguished clearly between the City of God and the City of Man. He did not look to the Roman Empire and its culture for security, but to the spiritual kingdom God was fashioning in the midst of the cultural transformation. Indeed, he was so careful not to conflate the two cities that he offended his contemporaries by asserting that God could fashion a new civilization just as well with the barbarians who were at the gate as he could with Christian Romans.<sup>59</sup> He was right—the future of western Christianity and culture lay with the Germanic barbarians. And yet, he reminds us, whichever barbarians are at the gates of the City of Man—be they Goths, modernists, postmodernists, or whoever you please—these are not entirely our gates. Let us not confuse Camelot with the Crystal City, our Heavenly Jerusalem.

C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image: An Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964), 222.

<sup>59</sup>Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei* Book IV, Chapter 15. See also Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 100-101.